



Bethel Board of Education

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Planning and Development Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 2100
Hartford, CT 06106

February 4, 2015

Re: House Bill No. 5096: *An Act Increasing the Threshold Required for Passage of Unfunded Mandates*

To All Committee Members,

HB 5096 is an important piece of legislation and the Bethel CT Board of Education encourages your individual support for the passage of this bill.

We recently conducted a study to assess student enrollment trends over the next 20 years in preparation of a proposal to renovate two 40 year old elementary schools in our small community. The detailed study, performed by Milone and MacBroom, one of the largest consulting firms in the Northeast, clearly showed the "aging of most of the 169 communities that were home to School Districts." Many small towns were losing student enrollment at alarming rates. Bethel CT has been more fortunate than most of these aging towns; our student population is declining at a much slower rate but it is declining nevertheless.

The causal factors are many but more than likely they end up being traced to young families with school-aged children moving out of state to more friendly locations where taxes are significantly less, housing is more affordable, the cost of living and raising a family is cheaper, and the schools are good but certainly not at the level of quality and as progressive as those in Connecticut.

This aging phenomenon puts unrealistic demands on the remaining community, comprised of a growing number of residents on fixed incomes or living on Social Security. They no longer have children in the schools and balk at the costs associated with maintaining a progressive, top quality, 21st century-focused educational system. It has become extremely challenging, year after year, to get a school operating budget passed on the first referendum. We often are able to take one step forward but are forced to take two steps backward as budgets are trimmed to get to a reasonably acceptable level.

While we fight the funding battle every February we do so knowing ECS (Education Cost Sharing) remains flat, now going on 8 consecutive years while our operating costs increase each year. Seldom are we reimbursed more than 70% of the Special Education "Excess Costs" we incur. This shortage forces our small town to absorb upwards of \$200,000 annually. Federal and State SPED mandates prescribe the services we must provide children with special educational needs, and we do so with care and pride in our Special Education Program, but we need the state to live up to its agreement to fully fund Special Education excess costs!

The most harmful, costly programs, however, are those mandated without funding, assuming towns have the financial ability to cover all related costs, and/or programs with short term or inadequate funding that add cost in the out years. Too often we are forced into programs that may solve a problem in one community or in one part of the state when that same problem does not exist for us. A

legislator gets credit from his constituents for solving his/her local problem while the rest of the us have to deal with a costly fix to some issue that never existed in our town or school system.

HB 5096 must be passed to put an end to the negative impact unfunded or inadequately funded mandates have on our ability to provide good, relevant, and challenging educational experiences for our children. In the private sector, it is commonplace to act with a mindset and purpose that says "if you don't have the money to do it right and support your initiative long term then you do not do it."

This is exactly what we espouse in Bethel. If you have not thought through and planned all elements of your proposal, especially the cost component, then the idea gets tabled. There is not and unending trough of money to fund public education. In aging communities educational funding is falling on the backs of the elderly and that fact must resonate more clearly in the General Assembly.

Please support and pass House Bill No. 5096.

Larry Craybas
Chairman, Bethel Board of Education
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